INDOCHINA
The Last Year of the War
The Navarre Plan

Bernard B. Fall

WHILE a previous article (MILITARY REVIEW, October 1956) dealt with the organization and tactics of the Communists in Indochina, this article will attempt to describe briefly the operations of the French Union Forces during the fateful 1953-54 period which led to the disaster of Dien Bien Phu and the cease-fire at Geneva in July 1954.

In brief, the problem that faced every French field commander in Indochina since the outbreak of hostilities in 1946 was to compel the main battle force of the enemy to make a fight-or-die stand; and to loosen the Communist stranglehold upon the majority of the population. The first of those objectives was strictly military; the second was fraught with political implications, and thus not within the sphere of control of the military commander (except when he, as in the case of Marshal de Lattre de Tassigny and General Paul Ely, simultaneously held the civilian post of French High Commissioner in Indochina).

Until 1953 the French logistical and manpower base was too narrow to permit a full-scale counteroffensive of nearly one-half million men over a terrain *four* times the size of Korea. However, by 1953, thanks to increasing American aid and French reinforcements, the time now was considered ripe to strike this decisive blow. The man chosen to lead the French Union Forces in this final operation of the war was a newcomer to Indochina, Lieutenant General Henri-Eugène Navarre.

When General Navarre took over command of the French Union Forces in the Far East on 28 May 1953, he found a situation that was at best stagnant. Surely, the first Vietnam People's Army (VPA) offensive into northern Laos had been stopped short of Luang Prabang, the royal residence of Laos, but at the price of building up another airhead at the Plaine des Jarres, thus again diverting precious troops from the Red River Delta. Navarre brought with him to Indochina the promise of increased American aid and that of additional fresh French troops: seven infantry battalions, the French reinforced United Nations battalion from Korea (where hostilities had ended in July 1953), an additional artillery group, and two battalions of combat engineers.

Furthermore, the Vietnamese National Army—which already had more than 100,000 men in the field—fighting as an ally of France was to raise within the year a first group of 19 "light" (that is, 600 men) commando battalions for the purpose of fighting the Communists on their own terrain, to be followed by 35 additional commando battalions within the next fiscal year.[1] Several subsectors had been trans-

[1] General Henri Marchand, *L'Indochine en Guerre*, Pouzet & Co., Paris, 1955, p 278

ferred to Vietnamese command in the meantime, in order to create a mobile reserve with the French troops thus withdrawn from duty in the fixed positions in thousands of bunkers of the De Lattre Line.

There had never been an official published program known as the "Navarre Plan." However, according to various public statements made at the time of its inception, the practical meaning and purpose of the plan becomes clear. According to Navarre's own chief of cabinet, Colonel Revol, the Navarre Plan was to endow the French battle corps "with a mobility and an aggressivity which it lacks." According to another authoritative source, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, the Navarre Plan was designed to break "the organized body of Communist aggression by the end of the 1955 fighting season," leaving the task of mopping up the smaller guerrilla groups to the national armies of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam.

Whatever the ultimate effect of the Navarre Plan, it cannot be denied that the French Union Forces showed the same offensive ability which they had displayed under the late Marshal De Lattre. In fact, it can even be said that too much activity was displayed too often at too many different places (see Figure 1), thus leaving troops and leaders but little time to prepare for the large-scale operations envisaged for the latter phase of the Navarre Plan. (The French still operated with *Groupes Mobiles* (units the size of a regimental combat team) as their largest tactical unit, while the VPA operated with Chinese type, 10,000-man divisions.)

On 17 July 1953 two airborne battalions were parachuted 150 miles behind Communist lines at Lang Son, destroying important enemy depots of Red Chinese and Russian matériel. The troops withdrew successfully to the coast where they were awaited by a French naval task force. This was followed on 28 July by Operation *Camargue*—an attempt by the French to liquidate a string of enemy fortified villages along the central Vietnamese coast which, in view of the losses they had caused to passing convoys, had become known as the "Street without Joy." Two airborne battalions, followed by 10 infantry battalions, three amphibious squadrons, two French Navy commando units, and adequate air support, sought for nearly two weeks to corner VPA Infantry Regiment Number 95. When the latter was finally cornered, one of its companies fought to the death while the rest of the regiment quietly "melted" into the countryside.

On 8 August began the successful air evacuation of the 12,000 men uselessly bottled up in the Na-San airhead, thus relieving the sorely overburdened French transport air force of one of its heavier charges and giving the Red River Delta, for the first time in years, an operational reserve for guerrilla mopup operations. The evacuation was completed without enemy interference on 11 August.

Antiguerrilla operations began now on a large scale within the delta. On 16 August began Operation *Tarentaise* in the Bui-Chu area, followed on 28 August by Operation *Claude*—the latter directed against regular VPA Battalion Number 120 which operated on an island outside of the main port of Haiphong—and by Operation *Brochet* (*Pike*) on 22 September. *Pike* was the largest antiguerrilla opera-

Combating the tactics of the Communists in Indochina, the French Union Forces which fought well lost the campaign there because they tried to fight the enemy too often at too many widely separated places

tion ever undertaken within the delta: no less than 17 infantry battalions, six artillery battalions, one combat engineer battalion, and two *Dinassaut* (naval assault boat groups) were engaged in order to wipe out VPA Infantry Regiment Number 42, infiltrated in Hung Yen province, in the center of the delta. After several severe fights, *Pike* came to a halt on 10 October; Regiment 42 had melted into the countryside, its arms hidden in underground caches.

In an effort to accentuate pressure upon the enemy's rear communications lines through methods similar to those of the Communists themselves, several *Groupes Commandos Mixtes Autochtones* (*GCMA*), or Mixed Native Commando Groups made up of French-trained Thai tribesmen and French cadres, began to operate behind enemy lines. They were, however, too weak to influence the outcome of any particular operation but proved useful for long-range reconnaissance. The most significant operation of such a commando group was the parachuting of 40 Meo tribesmen near Lao Kay on 4 October 1953 in an attempt to destroy VPA communications lines at this vital point of entry into Red China. The operation failed, but as late as October 1955 the Communist authorities in North Vietnam complained over their radio about guerrilla tribesmen who refused to surrender.

However, it became clear to the French High Command that the offensives of the Navarre Plan had thus far failed in their two main objectives: destruction of the enemy's organized battle force, and liquidation of the guerrilla threat behind French lines. Under the personal supervision of General Navarre, Operation *Mouette* (*Seagull*) was launched on 14 October into enemy territory south of the delta in direction of the important enemy supply center of Phu Nho Quan. More than six *Groupes Mobiles*, reinforced by tank and amphibious battalions, two French Navy marine units, broke through the Ninh Binh limestone hills in a pincer movement seeking to encircle the VPA's 320th Infantry Division. VPA Regiments 48 and 64 resisted and even counterattacked the vastly superior French forces until all vital supplies and matériel had been removed from Phu Nho Quan.

Contrary to the hopes of the French, Communist General Giap did not let himself be goaded to commit the mass of his elite forces for the sake of saving one division. When Phu Nho Quan had become useless, the VPA forces around it merely melted again into the rice paddies and hills, and the French entered a deserted city. On 7 November they returned to the delta perimeter. The 320th, although severely mauled, was still a fighting unit. The last attempt to force Giap to a decision on a terrain not of his own choosing had failed.

It but remained for General Navarre to seek out the enemy in his own lair, the mountain uplands. Two alternate solutions were open to him: either attack the enemy's main bases in the Thai-Nguyen Tuyen-Quang "redoubt" (with the chance of perhaps capturing a good part of the enemy's central government and supplies), or place his troops astride the traditional invasion routes into Laos. In spite of the entreaties of General René Cogny, the able commander of the Red River Delta, and in all likelihood due to nonmilitary consid-

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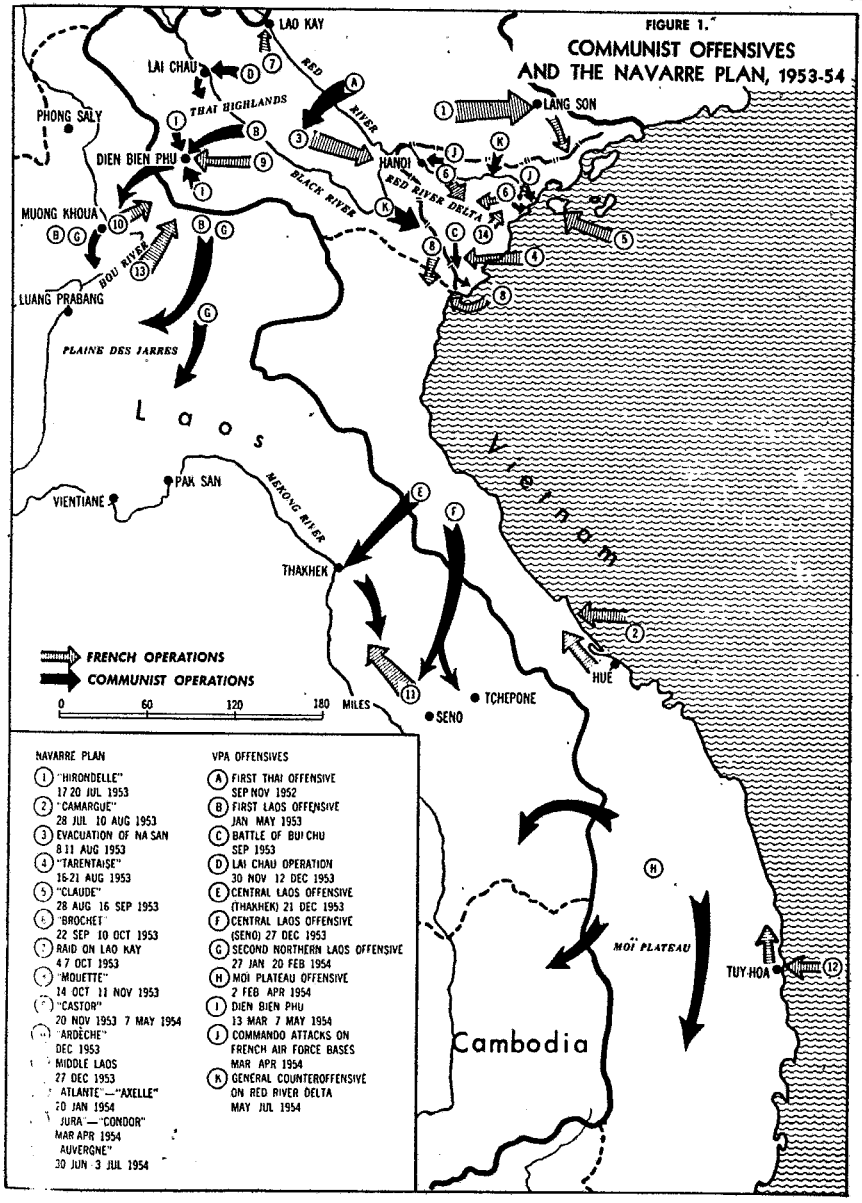


FIGURE 1.
COMMUNIST OFFENSIVES AND THE NAVARRE PLAN, 1953-54
LAO KAY
LAI CHAU
PHONG SALY
THAI HIGHLANDS
RED RIVER
DIEN BIEN PHU
BLACK RIVER
MUONG KHOUA
NAM HOU RIVER
LUANG PRABANG
PLAINE DES JARRES
LANG SON
HANOI
RED RIVER DELTA
L a o s
PAK SAN
VIENTIANE
MEKONG RIVER
THAKHEK
TCHEPONE
SENO
HUE
TUY HOA
MOÏ PLATEAU
Cambodia
FRENCH OPERATIONS
COMMUNIST OPERATIONS
0 60 120 180 MILES
NAVARRE PLAN
1 "HIRONDELLE" 17 20 JUL 1953
2 "CAMARGUE" 28 JUL 10 AUG 1953
3 EVACUATION OF NA SAN 8 11 AUG 1953
4 "TARENTAISE" 16-21 AUG 1953
5 "CLAUDE" 28 AUG 16 SEP 1953
6 "BROCHET" 22 SEP 10 OCT 1953
7 RAID ON LAO KAY 4 7 OCT 1953
8 "MOUETTE" 14 OCT 11 NOV 1953
9 "CASTOR" 20 NOV 1953 7 MAY 1954
10 "ARDÈCHE" DEC 1953 MIDDLE LAOS 27 DEC 1953
11 "ATLANTE"—"AXELLE" 20 JAN 1954
12 "JURA"—"CONDOR" MAR APR 1954
13 "AUVERGNE" 30 JUN 3 JUL 1954
VPA OFFENSIVES
A FIRST THAI OFFENSIVE SEP NOV 1952
B FIRST LAOS OFFENSIVE JAN MAY 1953
C BATTLE OF BUI CHU SEP 1953
D LAI CHAU OPERATION 30 NOV 12 DEC 1953
E CENTRAL LAOS OFFENSIVE (THAKHEK) 21 DEC 1953
F CENTRAL LAOS OFFENSIVE (SENO) 27 DEC 1953
G SECOND NORTHERN LAOS OFFENSIVE 27 JAN 20 FEB 1954
H MOI PLATEAU OFFENSIVE 2 FEB APR 1954
I DIEN BIEN PHU 13 MAR 7 MAY 1954
J COMMANDO ATTACKS ON FRENCH AIR FORCE BASES MAR APR 1954
K GENERAL COUNTEROFFENSIVE ON RED RIVER DELTA MAY JUL 1954

erations,[2] Navarre chose to defend Laos. At the same time he hoped to make this upland stronghold into a sufficiently attractive bait for Giap to commit his elite divisions against it in the hope of taking it.

The bait chosen turned out to be an oblong valley, about 10 miles long and six miles wide, in which the Japanese had built a fairly solid airfield. In pre-French times the little city in the center of the valley had been near the Chinese border and was, therefore, named "Seat of the Border Prefecture," or in Chinese: Dien Bien Phu.

The Trap

Contrary to what has been asserted elsewhere, Dien Bien Phu was never conceived as a "large-scale airborne raid."[3] Its entire mission from the outset was to become a "meat-grinder" for the bulk of the Communist battle force far from the vital Red River Delta, while the French Command would concentrate the remainder of its forces upon mopping up the delta without interference by regular enemy troops. In addition, bomber units stationed in Dien Bien Phu could successfully hamper—if not strangle altogether—the ever-increasing flow of Red Chinese supplies reaching the VPA, and the fortress could become a solid anchor for French raider units operating behind lines, in addition to covering northern Laos.

Operation *Castor*—the code name for the Dien Bien Phu attack—began on 20 November 1953 by the dropping of three parachute battalions over the valley. While the operation itself was a tactical surprise, a Communist mortar unit and several rifle companies training in the drop zone at the moment of the landing inflicted losses to the parachute force before withdrawing for the nearby ring of hills.

Thus the first objective of destroying enemy forces in the immediate vicinity of Dien Bien Phu was never achieved. Considering the number of troops available for the operation (seven paratroop battalions, three North African battalions, one Vietnamese and two tribal Thai battalions, one combat engineer battalion, one truck company, ten light tanks, two 75- and 105-mm artillery groups, and four 155-mm medium howitzers), the size of the valley prevented the occupation of the high grounds surrounding the fortress and their inclusion in the defense perimeter. Therefore, all French preparations had to be made in presumably full view of Communist reconnaissance parties.

However, the major miscalculation of the Dien Bien Phu operation seems to have been made by French intelligence estimates which initially credited the enemy with an artillery composed of 40 to 60 medium howitzers capable of firing 25,000 rounds. However, they apparently gauged Giap in terms of his attack two years earlier on the Na-San airhead and gave the VPA and its Red Chinese backers, now freed from the drain of the Korean conflict, no credit for improvement. As it turned out, Giap's artillery used an estimated 240 to 350 guns, including Soviet heavy rocket launchers, and fired nearly 350,000 rounds, while the fortress (initially provided with 13 days of supplies and less than 10 days of ammunition and fuel) had to use its ammunition sparingly in the face of ever-increasing losses of air-dropped tonnage to the enemy as the defense perimeter shrunk to less than a few hundred yards in diameter.

An investigation by a commission of French generals as to the causes of the Dien Bien Phu disaster was held recently.

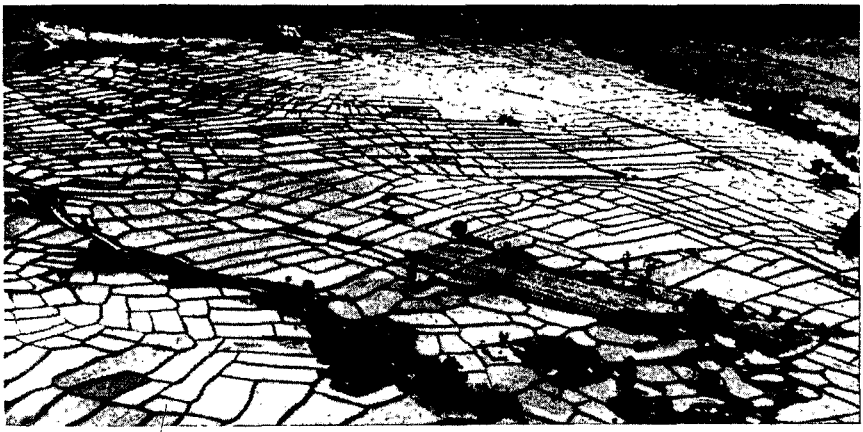
[2] The Kingdom of Laos was the first and thus far only Indochinese State to sign an association treaty with France. French political circles felt that northern Laos could not be abandoned to the enemy without also endangering political negotiations with Vietnam and Cambodia

[3] Lieutenant Colonel Norman E. Martin, "Dien Bien Phu and the Future of Airborne Operations," *Military Review*, June 1956, p 20

Its results are still classified but as early as 9 June 1954 General Pierre Koenig, then French Minister of Defense, admitted that:

In fact, from the outset, the enemy artillery dominated ours. . . . It was the same with the [VPA] antiaircraft artillery which immediately proved very effective. Under such conditions the drama began with the beginning of the battle. . . .

However, the drama of Dien Bien Phu was only a relatively more spectacular part of a drama that now played throughout Indochina on a far grander scale:



Ricefields broken by numerous dikes and clusters of bushes in the area near Bien Hoa, located northeast of Saigon, provide excellent terrain for guerrilla ambushes.

General Vo Nguyen Giap's long-promised general counteroffensive.

Communist General Counteroffensive

Ever since his first attack upon northern Laos in the spring of 1953, Giap had retained a corps of about four divisions in the Thai highlands and the northern part of central Vietnam, at almost equal distance between the Red River Delta and Luang Prabang. Throughout the rainy season of 1953 (May to October), Giap successfully avoided engaging his main force while Navarre vainly sought to disrupt the Communist timetable or order of battle. In December Giap was ready. Regiment 101 of the 325th and Regiment 66 of the 304th Infantry Divisions, VPA, drove across the Annamite mountain chain, sweeping ahead of themselves French *Groupe Mobile* (*G. M.*) Number 2 which had been hurriedly sent out of Hué to meet the new threat and whose battered remains now fell back upon the Laotian side of the mountains to the unfortified airfield of Seno.

Once more Navarre had to disperse his already thinly stretched reserves. Along the tried pattern of Na-San, the Plaine des Jarres and Dien Bien Phu, another fortified airhead was hurriedly created around Seno, and a separate Middle Laos Operational Groupment (GOML) activated on Christmas Day 1953: three parachute battalions from the general reserve—including two Vietnamese battalions which gave an excellent account of themselves—parts of *G. M.* Number 2, all of *G. M.* Number 1 and, a few days later, *G. M.* Number 51, plus assorted air and supply components, were concentrated 400 miles

away from the major battlefronts of the Red River Delta and Dien Bien Phu.

On 25 December 1953 the Communists reached the Thai border at Thakhek on the Mekong—the overland lifeline to northern Laos was severed and Indochina cut in two. In the meantime, Regiment 66 of the VPA directly cut across the mountains (see Figure 1) and one by one crushed the smaller French posts strung out along the road from Vietnam to Seno. *G. M.* 51, sent to the rescue, fell into a severe ambush of the jungle variety and its lead battalion was practically annihilated on 24 January 1954, losing all its vehicles.

Two of the paratroop battalions of the Seno airhead, by valiant stand at Hine Siu, saved Seno from a direct attack, but Giap's major southern Laos forces bypassed the now well-fortified position and melted into the jungle only to reappear 20 days later nearly 200 miles farther south, in hitherto quiet northern Cambodia, while another pincer from the Annamese coast suddenly attacked the lightly defended posts of the Moï Plateau.

In northern Laos the situation had also taken a turn for the worse. The entire 316th VPA Division, after having taken the airhead of Lai Chau 55 miles north of Dien Bien Phu, now again marched upon Luang Prabang in four separate columns, liquidating the small garrisons of Muong Nguoi and Muong Khoua, where the year before a small Laotian garrison under a French captain had fought to the death to delay the Communist rush upon Luang Prabang. This time the 2d Laotian Battalion and the 2d Battalion, 3d Regiment, French Foreign Legion, covered the retreat of the small garrisons toward the new defense perimeter around Luang Prabang, being nearly wiped out in the process. On 13 February 1954 Navarre airlifted another five battalions, including a parachute battalion, into Luang Prabang, thus further dispersing his forces and adding another crushing burden to the already heavily taxed air infrastructure. Five additional battalions were diverted to Muong Sai, covering the northern approaches to the city.

Giap thus had fully succeeded in making Navarre progressively throw his painfully gathered mobile reserve into the four corners of Indochina in pursuit of a "single-battle decision" that was definitely not part of the pattern of the war fought in Indochina. Yet, in his New Year's message to his troops, Navarre stated:

Having lost all hopes of winning a decisive battle in the Red River Delta, the Vietminh disperses its forces. . . . However, in that type of warfare, we have the advantage of being able to concentrate our forces rapidly at any essential point. . . . A campaign begun under such conditions can but turn in our favor.

What happened next cannot be readily explained in terms of military strategy and must await careful examination by future students of military history: with Dien Bien Phu threatened, central Laos invaded, northern Laos under attack, and the Red River Delta more infiltrated than ever, Navarre, on 20 January 1954, launched a combined land and amphibian attack against Tuy-Hoa, a stretch of Communist-held coast in southern Central Vietnam that had been in Communist hands since 1945 and was of no military usefulness to anyone. Operation *Atlante* —as it was called—diverted another 15,000 troops and, after initial successes in the landing areas, soon bogged down in the jungle-covered hills of the roadless hinterland. The time now was ripe for Giap's last round.

Within a week after the beginning of Operation *Atlante*, Giap called off the attack of the 316th Division upon northern Laos and concentrated the bulk of the 304th, 308th, and 312th Infantry Divisions, and all of the 351st "Heavy" Divi-

sion around Dien Bien Phu. Giap's attack began at 1730 on 13 March 1954 by a heavy artillery barrage upon the two major outlying hill positions covering the central redoubt which were overrun 48 hours later after several "human sea" attacks.

According to a conservative French weekly, *Paris-Match*, of 12 May 1956, the report of the French military investigation commission states that General de Castries had committed "a grave error" in not attempting to hold the two hill positions at all costs.

Attempts were made to constitute a link-up force in northern Laos in order to save the doomed fortress. Under the code name of *Jura* and *Condor*, about 5,000 men were assembled under Colonels De Crèvecoeur and Goddard, but the attempt was finally abandoned for the good reason that there were simply not enough reserves left to give the column the necessary strength for at least an even chance of survival against the 40,000 Communist troops concentrated around Dien Bien Phu.

Furthermore, the logistical problem of supplying by air a mobile 12,000-man force over several weeks in addition to supplying Dien Bien Phu with the daily 200 tons it needed was simply insuperable under the then prevailing conditions, the more so as the monsoon weather considerably curtailed air activities throughout the area.

The End

The ensuing disaster, although it deprived the French only of about four percent of their total military manpower in Indochina, proved a crippling blow. Navarre's order of the day of 9 May 1954, that Dien Bien Phu's "sacrifice had not been in vain, for . . . it saved Upper Laos from invasion and preserved the [Red River] Delta," is not too convincing, for the Red River Delta, already thoroughly undermined by Communist guerrillas and infiltrated VPA regulars, already had begun to crack even before the arrival of the victorious VPA divisions from Dien Bien Phu. General Paul Ely, the new French commander who had replaced Navarre, now had to face in the delta area nearly 100,000 Communist regulars and an equal number of guerrillas with less than 80,000 troops of his own. And among the French Union Forces certain Vietnamese units, seeing the signs of the tide, began to disintegrate.

On 30 June 1954 began Operation *Auvergne*, the last of the Indochina war: two armored and two motorized *G.M.* covered the retreat of all French forces in the southern part of the delta toward a shortened line south of the Hanoi-Haiphong road, where the maintenance of communications had become a daily battle between French armored forces and hordes of Communist infantry now armed with modern recoilless weapons.

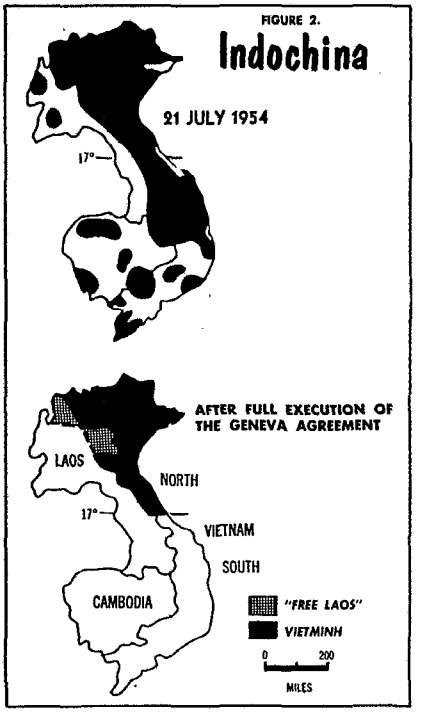
Hostilities ended on 21 July 1954 after a cease-fire had been negotiated at Geneva which gave the Democratic Republic of Vietnam control of all of Vietnam north of the 17th parallel (see Figure 2). The eight years of war had cost the French about 10 billion dollars (in addition to 1.1 billion dollars United States aid delivered before the cease-fire), and 106,000 dead or missing, including three generals and 2,000 other officers.

Conclusions

1. As General Gavin once said: "Mobility which does not result in concentration for battle is of no use whatever." This is, perhaps, one of the major lessons to be drawn from French tactics in Indochina during the last year of the war. Contrary to the previous years, when a "wall psychology" prevailed, no one can accuse Navarre of immobility. However, the judiciousness of his use of mobility is open to serious question.

2. As a result, although on the whole

the French Union Forces were superior in numbers to the enemy, they were numerically inferior to the enemy at *any* given point of attack. One must add, in all fairness, that the VPA could afford to use hundreds of thousands of slave laborers for logistical and communications support where the French had to use field troops.



3. The Indochina war had confirmed once more—the Korean conflict being, by and large, another example—the *limited usefulness of air superiority in wars involving underdeveloped areas.* General L. M. Chassin, the former Commanding General of the French Far Eastern Air Force, gave the problem much thought in his recent book, *Aviation Indochine:*

The Communists are well placed to unleash small mass wars in Asia as well as in Africa. They would regain once more all their opportunities for victory if we do not take effective countermeasures.

Chassin asserts that such wars—and Communist operations in Indochina amply bear him out on this—cannot be won by an atomic arsenal. The West at present, by attempting to rely more and more upon unconventional weapons, simply risks finding itself in a position where it will be technologically incapable of effectively dealing with an enemy whose hordes of ground troops advance single file along jungle paths, supplied by swarms of porters from depots and arms factories installed in mountain caves.

4. The importance of political and social action upon the civilian population, both at home and in the combat area, cannot be stressed enough. At home—and here, the French with regard to Indochina failed to a far greater extent than the Americans with regard to Korea—the objective of such a "limited war" must be made clear in order to obtain the moral and material support necessary to provide the fighting army with all that it needs in terms of manpower and equipment. In the combat area the Western force will always be the "stranger" (sometimes welcome, sometimes not) while the adversary will be on his own home ground. A thoroughgoing psychological warfare program coupled with effective improvements (good local government, public health, and agricultural reform programs) must provide the local population with a reason to commit itself effectively to the Western side without feeling that it betrays its own national interests. In Vietnam many of the anti-Communist Nationalists felt that a French victory would merely mean a continuation of French colonial influence, while a Communist victory, no matter at what cost to their personal liberties, would bring some type of national "independence."